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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ALGIERS 001164

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [SOCI](#) [AG](#)

SUBJECT: CULTURE MINISTER TOUMI'S 15 MINUTES OF FAME

REF: ALGIERS 983

Classified By: DCM Thomas F. Daughton; reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

¶11. (C) SUMMARY: Culture Minister Khalida Toumi has emerged as the latest face on government efforts to implement conservative social policies and neutralize regime critics. In September, Toumi issued a directive to shut down bars and nightclubs located near cultural monuments in downtown Algiers. Clubs and bars have since closed their doors throughout the capital. More recently, Toumi has taken credit for banning the latest book by dissident writer Mohamed Benchicou and for firing the director of Algeria's National Library, Amine Zaoui. Although Toumi began her political career in the 1990s as an outspoken feminist and opposition figure, she has now transformed into an ardent supporter of the regime and has held on to her ministerial post since 2002 despite a series of professional blunders. Toumi's recent assertiveness does not appear to be an indication of her rising influence in government, but rather an effort on her part to prove her loyalty to the president in the face of political anxiety looming over Bouteflika's third term. END SUMMARY.

FROM LIBERAL OUTSIDER...

¶12. (C) Khalida Toumi started her political career in the opposition camp as an outspoken activist in the Algerian feminist movement and later as a member of parliament and vice president of the Rally for Culture and Democracy (RCD) political party. Toumi also ran Algeria's largest women's rights NGO at the time, RACHDA, and in 1994 organized a high-visibility women's protest against terrorism and violence. Soon after Bouteflika's 1999 election, however, Toumi had a falling-out with RCD leader Said Sadi and in 2000 she accepted an advisory position in Bouteflika's administration. Some observers speculated that Toumi offered the administration credibility with civil society actors and Algeria's intellectual elite through her RCD contacts. In 2002, Bouteflika promoted Toumi to Minister of Culture and Communication, making Toumi the government's official spokesperson.

¶13. (C) Toumi's tenure as minister has been a series of false starts. In 2003, she lost the government spokesperson title after she botched the government's message on the Khalifa banking scandal. One of our staff noted that Toumi's statement, which she tried to deliver in Arabic, was almost unintelligible. The press also roundly criticized Toumi for her mismanagement of the 2007 "Algeria Cultural Capital of the Arab World" exposition and the 2003 "Year of Algeria" expo in France (reftel). Although Toumi managed to hang onto her post after these well-publicized fiascoes, her standing

with Bouteflika at times appeared uncertain. At a 2008 International Women's Day rally, Toumi faced an awkward moment standing next to the president when Bouteflika told his audience, "I need five women like Louisa Hanoune (the anti-government head of the Workers' Party) in my government, then everything would be fine."

...TO REGIME STOOGE

¶4. (C) Recently, Toumi has emerged as the latest face on government efforts to implement socially conservative policies and neutralize regime critics. In September, Toumi ordered the closure of all nightclubs and bars in the central Algiers region of Riad el Feth, arguing the need to preserve the area's cultural significance as a memorial to the war for independence. While taking questions from MPs, Toumi said her ministry would close 17 nightclubs with the cooperation of the Ministry of Interior. Soon after her declaration, bars and night clubs throughout Algiers began closing their doors, including establishments within major hotels located well outside the Riad el Feth area.

¶5. (C) Some Algerians have interpreted Toumi's directive as an effort to moralize society. The president of the Association of Producers of Alcoholic Beverages, Ali Heman, told the press that some of the pressure to close bars came from petitions organized by conservative local interest groups. A local bar owner told us that he continues to operate discreetly, but he noted that some of his neighbors have used Toumi's comments to urge him to close. University

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of Algiers Sociologist Zoubir Amrous told us that he sees Toumi's order as a concession made by the regime to placate a rising tide of socially conservative Islam in Algeria.

¶6. (C) In October, Toumi trained her sights on dissident writer Mohamed Benchicou, former owner of the banned opposition newspaper Le Matin. Just prior to the recent opening of the Algiers International Book Fair, Benchicou's printing house received an order by police to halt the printing of his latest title, The Diary of a Free Man. Days later on October 21, Toumi called a press conference and took personal responsibility for the decision: "I took the decision to ban Benchicou's book," Toumi asserted, "and I assume responsibility for that decision." According to Toumi, Benchicou's latest work of fiction compared Interior Minister Zerhouni to French General Jacques Massu, thereby defaming the reputation of a member of the security forces and violating the Algerian constitution. Toumi sneered that her decision may have saved Benchicou from facing yet another prison term for his writings. Oddly, Toumi's comments contradicted government spokesman Abderrachid Boukerzaza's statement just days earlier that the government had nothing to do with the decision to censure Benchicou's book.

¶7. (C) In the aftermath of the Benchicou ban, Toumi took the extra step of firing National Library Director Amine Zaoui on October 26, ostensibly for granting an ISBN number for Benchicou's book and giving it the green light to be printed. Zaoui's dismissal provoked outcries from Algerian writers, journalists and intellectuals. El-Hamma, a group representing the country's intellectual elite, addressed a letter to Bouteflika decrying Toumi's action as an affront to artistic expression and basic human rights. Journalists told us, however, that the real reason behind Zaoui's downfall was his decision to invite Syrian poet Adonis to an October 14 conference at the National Library. During the event, Adonis criticized Arab leaders for institutionalizing Islam in governments and regretted that Algeria had also taken this path.

COMMENT: PUPPETEER, OR PUPPET?

¶8. (C) Toumi has had more than her fair share of the spotlight in recent months, but her new assertiveness does not seem to be an indication of her rising influence within the government. Toumi's personal assistant told us privately that the directive to ban Benchicou's book originated with Interior Minister Zerhouni. As for Zaoui, Toumi's aide said the decision came directly from the presidency. Zaoui's dismissal, she said, was aimed at appeasing religious conservatives, particularly Muslim Scholars Association President Cheikh Chibane, who bristled at Adonis' remark that religion should not be part of state institutions. Political puppeteering aside, Toumi's tough talk and newfound conservatism may simply be an effort to prove her loyalty to Bouteflika as he lays the political groundwork for a third term.

PEARCE